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EDITING TO KILL

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Whether the editorial matter of the average high-school classic is a precipitate of the text, or the text is a sublimate of the editorial matter, I shall not attempt to say. But I may venture to assert, without too great risk of contradiction, that a lot of learning is a dangerous thing, especially as it is evinced in the editing of many texts—of which, verily, there is no end. I have twenty edited texts of *Julius Caesar* alone on my bookshelf. Little volumes, these, in monopolized pedantry. And the end is not yet, either of the monopoly or of the pedantry! Surely it is good to be an author; but it is very good to be an editor, for the editor must know all that the author knows in addition to what he knows himself! And if an author ever knew that he knew as much as his editor very often says he knew, he would have been a very much prouder author than he was. The worst that I can wish an author whom I dislike is that he shall have to study himself, edited, in some future incarnation. And the worst that can happen to an editor of a classic is that he be obliged to decipher his own notes, read a play or a poem or a novel according to his own advice, and answer his own questions about it. He is, in short, just what he deserves to be, not a *littérateur*, but a *literachewer*.

Classics for high-school use need to be rescued from pedantry. Nothing is more thoroughly calculated to cripple mental activity and stifle mental alertness than the average, edited high-school English classic. Whatever may be said in favor of its format, its content is invariably diffuse, verbose, forbidding, burdensome, and, for the most part, unnecessary. The proportion of text to editorial matter is about as one to two or three. Here are some exact figures of the proportions:

	Actual Text	Total Pages
<i>Milton's Minor Poems</i>	56	137
<i>Macbeth</i>	58	188
<i>As You Like It</i>	93	190
<i>Hamlet</i>	141	289
<i>Twelfth Night</i>	85	171

There is just one of two conclusions to be drawn from these figures: either the proportion of editorial matter is far too great, or the text is far too difficult for high-school pupils if it needs so much explanation. Let us read simpler texts or the same ones with less or no editing. At any rate let us read something—even magazine and newspaper reprints—that will not necessitate our wading through

1. An author's life.
2. Introductory comment.
3. Critical comment.
4. Parallel bibliography and biography.
5. Explanation of versification.

(Text)

6. Explanatory notes.
7. Topics for composition.
8. Review questions.
9. Glossary.

The Shakspearean text that does not carry along with it all of these nine pieces of literary baggage today is meagerly edited. Many texts contain more. Not only is this editorial material entirely too bulky, but it is usually far too scholarly for high-school pupils. There are too many research notes as a rule. The information given is too detailed or too unintelligibly stated or too self-evident to need mention at all. The result is that most of our texts in their very content are discouraging to pupils. There is a little of Shakspeare to be enjoyed and a mass of somebody else to be worried through. In order to pack so much material in so small a compass of space, very fine print must be used. This makes the text forbidding at the very outset. The best pedagogy says that we are not to study an author's life before we have read his work or works. Whether or not this be sound advice, the conscientious editor always starts with biography. The pupil opens the book to the life of Shakspeare when the understanding was that *The Merchant of Venice* was to be read. Libraries are everywhere, in school and out. Which is better, to have a pupil look up the life of Shakspeare (if it is necessary to know about it for the appreciation of the play!) or to guide him to finding it for himself in the school or town library? Then, too, isn't this "much-editing" a reflection, rather, upon our

teachers? Requirements of scholarship in those who would become teachers are higher than they were; teachers are now trained better than ever. I believe those who qualify for high-school positions in English teaching are equipped to teach the high-school classics, or know how and where to equip themselves for the task on short notice. It is comfortable, of course, to sit down in an easy chair and have all the information you need right at hand. But there is no easy, as there is no royal, road to learning. The edited classic too often stultifies, confuses, contradicts, with its attempted enrichment. It loads a lyric with a heaviness not its own; it puts a weight upon that which was intended to be as light and as free as air.

If I were to stop an orchestra leader from time to time during the playing of an overture in order to examine minutely into this note and that, I should be accused of spoiling the total effect, the *tout ensemble*. An overture is much more than a mere collection of notes. So too is a poem or a play much more than a mere assemblage of words, phrases, and clauses. But our editor, usually a college professor unfortunately, would have us believe otherwise. He, with his tweedle-dum and tweedle-dee, would have us stop all along the line to examine into this phrase and that word, into this archaism and that coinage. He will disclaim any such intention of course. But he has *unconsciously* made the pupil and the teacher victims of "study-nervousness." So much explanatory material written about and through the poem or the play they are reading first diverts their attention, then overwhelms them with an appalling sense of "what they ought to do," and lastly puts them into a condition of "scatter-brainedness" that totally misfits them for the proper kind of reading of any good and great literature.

These conclusions have been reached only after a thorough examination of more than fifty different texts and after several years of teaching experience. The following quotations are given in further evidence of the foregoing criticism. They are taken at random from a wide variety of texts; they are by no means the most exaggerated specimens of their kind to be found; and the number of them in each text examined is legion:

1. Some introductory comment that is either superfluous or else written far above the heads of high-school pupils:

"Yet this enigmatic speech, with its undersenses and its ironies, is after all appropriate to the half-lights, the elemental problems of the theme which it sets forth."

"Gamelyn dates from the time of Chaucer, and may be read with tolerable ease by those who have mastered the language of *The Canterbury Tales*."

"Wordsworth's *The Education of Nature* is full of musical *rallentandos*."

"*Pericles* was added in the Third Folio in 1664."

"The second volume of the Variorum *Hamlet* contains a mass of invaluable material, including the full text of the First Quarto."

2. Some explanations of versification that are either too detailed or utterly worthless for other evident reasons:

"*Sergeant* must be scanned as equivalent to a trisyllable."

"The number of feminine endings, the proportion of overflow to end—stopped lines sufficiently show this [that *Macbeth* belongs to Shakespere's later work]."

"After the tenth syllable, one or two unaccented syllables are sometimes added."

"A phrasal-rhythmic effect that is pleasing is produced."

"Do not give the line six feet."

"Each of these unstressed or faintly stressed syllables either follows or precedes a foot [of two syllables] in which the stress is very strong."

"The metric accentuation which has just been illustrated is only lightly superimposed upon, and does not submerge, the sense accentuation—that which, just as in prose, arises from the ordinary pronunciation and significance of the individual words."

3. Some explanatory notes and definitions that need explaining and defining themselves:

"*Portentous*: From Latin *pro*, forth, and *tendere*, to stretch."

"*Prodigious*: Grown portentous."

"*Carriions*: Carcasses, a contemptuous epithet."

"*Sterile curse*: Curse of sterility."

"*Void your rheum*: Eject your spittle."

"*Marry*: This very frequent interjection is the distorted remnant of an oath invoking the Virgin by name."

"*The Roynish clown*: 'Roynish' is a term of extreme disparagement and vilification, used nowhere else in the poet's works."

"With some Elizabethan oddities of thought, yet sincere and graceful." (Regarding George Herbert's *The Gifts of God*.)

"This song, like Ben Jonson's *Drink to me only with thine eyes*, is a mosaic of precious stones found, polished, and joined together by the hand of genius." (Regarding Burns's *O my Luve's Like a Red, Red Rose*.)

"*Grounds of expediency*: Compare 19—iii."

"*Dareful*: Here only in Shakespeare."

"*Cap and bells*: The insignia of a fool."

4. Some inserted stage directions that are both inane and superfluous (not always the work of the modern editor, it is admitted):

(*Enter Celia with a writing*)

Rosalind: Peace!

Here comes my sister, reading: stand aside.

(*Clock strikes*)

Olivia: The clock upbraids me with the waste of time.

(*Flourish and shout*)

Brutus: What means this shouting?

Macbeth: Why sinks that cauldron? (*Haulboys*) And what noise is that?

King: (*To messenger*) Leave us. (*Exit messenger*.)

(*A noise within*)

Queen: Alack, what noise is this?

5. Some miscellaneous editorial absurdities:

One text of *Macbeth* gives twenty-five pages to quotations from Holmshed's *Chronicle*.

Of twelve texts of *Macbeth* that have been closely examined, only one¹ calls attention to the notorious mispunctuation in the following passage:

¹ This is the Riverside edition, one of the few editions of *Macbeth*, by the way, that have recently been removed from the New York lists.

Macbeth: If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly: if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; etc.

There should be a semicolon or a period after "well" in the first line of this speech and a comma after "quickly" in the second. This change is necessary for the proper vocal and grammatical rendition of the lines. All actors read it accordingly. And since the reading of a play aloud is essential in classroom teaching, editors should first of all aid in the elucidation of the text for reading purposes. But I cannot find a word of annotation about this in any high-school text.¹

In one edition of *As You Like It* there are three pages of such questions as the following: "In what ways is *Rosalind's* attitude toward *Phebe's* pride recalled by her treatment of Jacques's melancholy in Sc. i; and of Silvius' submissiveness in Sc. iii?"

To Lady Macbeth's "We fail! . . ." three texts each give two pages of discussion.

Now, college professors of English have no right to interfere with a child's education to this extent. They are "out-professoring" themselves. It is not necessary to comment upon their various types of editorial madness as illustrated in these few illustrations. They speak clearly for themselves. When an editor defines "cap and bells" as "insignia" he simply makes confusion more confused, and there's an end to it. There can be no profitable discussion of this. If the teacher of the classic from which it is taken cannot teach the meaning of "cap and bells" better than that, she deserves to lose her job—as the editor deserves to lose his royalty. Such materials do not explain to high-school pupils. I doubt if college students could be much benefited by them. If we must have explanation, we must have it better than this.

Editors are not to blame so largely for the stage directions that are inserted throughout the text of Shakspearean plays, though they sometimes intrude themselves here. Their notes, which are usually far over high-school pupils' heads or else completely lost in a diffusiveness of "sesquipedalian verbiage," are paralleled by the vacuity and the inanity of these directions. Would it not be well to permit pupils to discover the stage actions from the context? It is nearly always indicated there except at the ends of scenes and acts. It stimulates a pupil's interest to be asked to indicate the action from

¹ The Variorum *Macbeth* makes this point clear of course: Is it possible that our editors fail to consult this master-text in their editorial labors!

the text; he feels complimented and in most cases he will have no difficulty in discerning just the action required. But when the text says, "'Give me your hand,'" and the inserted direction says, "*(They shake hands)*," both teacher and pupil have suffered insult to their intelligence. There is nothing left for them to do but loll automatically in their morris chairs or self-rockers with which every classroom should be equipped where such somnolent texts are used. The greatest fun I ever had in the classic-room was in the teaching of the first act of *The Merchant of Venice* from mimeographed sheets on which the text only had been copied. There were no stage directions, no divisions into scenes, no names of characters. The pupils were keen to furnish all of these and they did so easily from the mimeographed text itself.

We want and of course must have classic texts, but we want more of Mr. Author and less of Mr. Editor, if you please. The editorial embellishments may be omitted entirely from the texts to be used by vocational pupils; also, I think, from those to be used by pupils preparing for college. However, the future student of dead languages may be much benefited by reading that "*sterile* means *cursed with sterility*," that "*roynish* is a term of *disparagement* and *vilification*," that *dareful* is used only once in Shakspeare, that *rallentando* prevails in a certain Wordsworthian poem. I do not see how he can be, but then, "for ways that are vain" education is sometimes peculiar. In our vocational English work we should like to have just what the author wrote and allow the pupil "to take a try" at that. What he does not understand will do no harm. What little he can understand may do a deal of good. Besides, he has a teacher who is equipped to *tell* him much more interestingly about Shakspeare and Wordsworth than a dry-as-dust college professor has written about them in solidly set material. Our vocational pupils need to appreciate literature. They must get this appreciation in, of, and for the text itself, not in, of, for, through, and by editorial persiflage. If they hate literature, blame the editor; if they love it, give the credit to the author and also perhaps to the tact and personality of the teacher. When our future carpenters and brokers and shopkeepers have learned to love literature so well that they never go to work without a

masterpiece for occasional reading, let us give them a masterpiece, not a *master pieced*. Let us give them a neat little *Julius Caesar* with some good illustrations, but with no notes, no introduction, no life, no glossary, no explanations of verse, no exposition of Quarto and Folio editions, no critical comment—in short, with none of the scholarship that not only does not explain Shakspeare but condemns itself in its effort to explain.

Not the least of the harm wrought by our average editor exists in the materials he usually furnishes for composition work to be based upon the classic. He is not satisfied with inculcating the educational righteousness of “writing about” the classic by means of his own elaborate composition—the composition that makes of it a meatless literary sandwich. He goes farther and suggests “special topics” to be “chewed upon.” These topics are usually so abstract, and so variable and indefinite in suggestive scope—some entirely too close and detailed, others entirely too broad—that, even if oral and written composition were desirable all along the classic way, they would afford the poorest possible opportunity for unified, coherent expression. To illustrate, I give a few random specimens taken from various texts:

Caesar's Epilepsy
Portia's Shrewdness
Nerissa's Thoughtfulness
Lady Macbeth's Remorse
Olivia's Cleverness
Milton's Idea of Sadness
Sir Launfal's Pride
The Element of Reflection in Wordsworth's Poetry
The Spirit of the Ancient Mariner
Lancelot's Grief

Usually such topics as these are apportioned in equal numbers to sections of the classic—chapters, acts, cantos—and often enough the effort of the editor seems to have been to keep the group numbers equal, no matter what the sacrifice in quality of topic. Now, one of the most valuable results of vocational English is just this: it gives pupils dialectical energy and dictional versatility in the subject-matter of life-problems. As adults they will be called upon to read about and discuss topics of daily industrial

and commercial interest. They will rarely, if ever, be called upon to analyze Hamlet's insanity or Lear's isolation. True, they may from time to time have occasion to talk about this classic character or that, casually and spontaneously, but the heaviness and the seriousness of their school-day work will probably have prepared them but poorly for any valuable individual opinion or for any natural expression of appreciation about any great literary figure. The "appreciations" so assiduously compiled by editors for the complementing of their editorial labors are anything but live and fresh, as a rule. They are nearly always dead expression about dead matters by dead men. But so omnivorously do they surround the subject, oftentimes to the point of repeating repetition, that they leave no possible opening for the formulation of original and independent opinion about character, context, or action. In other words, they leave nothing more to be said even in other words. Witness, on the library shelves, the number of books that have been written *about* each one of our great authors—little journeys into the jungle of pedantic madness. Witness, therefore, the uselessness of having high-school pupils follow the trails or attempt to blaze new ones.

There is, however, a consolation to be thankful for—most teachers and pupils ignore the editorial matter entirely and are doing so more and more. Teachers are coming to understand that a classic cannot be *taught*; that it must be touched lightly, and that inspiration is quite as necessary for literary appreciation as for literary composition. There are some teachers, to be sure, who even yet prefer to maul a poem or play after their own particular manner, but even this is not so bad, cannot be, as the editor's overhauling. The wife of one of the world's great preachers once said that her husband handled a Bible text as a dog handles a bone—manipulated it till there was no meat left upon it. Her husband was not present at the time or he might have resented the compliment as inapplicable in some points. I have seen teachers handle a poem in much the same way. The famous Dr. Driver once said in a public address that every word, every syllable, every letter, "Yea, every punctuation mark of the Bible," is inspired. His unorthodox brethren made much of this extreme

statement and indulged many a fling at him, both publicly and privately. I have seen some teachers, again, who, in their teaching of a classic, seemed to regard even the punctuation as inspired, so close and elaborate was their analysis of details. (We should find many a miscarriage of inspiration, surely, if the punctuation in our classic literature were always taken seriously; cf. *Macbeth*.) But the rank and file of teachers of English are reading poems and plays to their classes, or having their pupils do it, and letting it go at that. They are allowing pupils to do their own editing in notebooks, when editing is necessary. And all of this is as it should be. A pupil who cannot love and appreciate a classic by merely reading it or hearing it read will not be made to do so by analyzing it. A child who does not like a certain kind of cake will not be made to do so by mixing it with medicine in order that it may be easier to take.

But the time allotted for the study of a classic in most of our curricula is entirely too long. It has probably been felt that ways must be devised to "use it up"—and they have been! Pupils of elementary- and high-school age should read much; they should read many books, rather than a few with the adult thoroughness that the texts indicate should be brought to bear. Our courses of study need to be revised in many respects, but in none more than in the apportionment of literary classics to a certain quarter-year or half-year or year, as the case may be. All of this is very trite. It has been regarded as sound pedagogy for a long time. But our editors of texts disregard it as consistently as they do most sound pedagogy. They serve up so many entrées with *Hamlet* that it would take a mental gourmand a year to do justice to them, and he would be left a hopeless dyspeptic ever afterward if he attempted to tax his mind and his spirit with such elephantine digestion.

This paper cannot be more appropriately concluded than by quoting at some length from *Eóthen*, that *unedited* masterpiece of Kinglake's:

A learned commentator knows something of the Greeks in the same sense as an oil-and-color man may be said to know something of painting; but take an untamed child and leave him alone for twelve months with any translation

of Homer, and he will be nearer by twenty centuries to the spirit of old Greece; *he* does not stop in the ninth year of the siege to admire this or that group of words; *he* has no books in his tent; but he shares in vital counsels with the "King of men," and knows the inmost souls of the impending gods. How profanely he exults over the powers divine when they are taught to dread the prowess of mortals! And most of all, how he rejoices when the God of War flies howling from the spear of Diomed, and mounts into heaven for safety! Then, the beautiful episode of the sixth book! The way to feel this is not to go casting about and learning from pastors and masters how best to admire it. The impatient child is not grubbing for beauties, but pushing the siege; the women vex him with their delays and their talking; the mention of the nurse is personal, and little sympathy has he for the child that is young enough to be frightened at the nodding plume of a helmet: but all the while that he thus chafes at the pausing of the action, the strong vertical light of Homer's poetry is blazing so full upon the people and things of the *Iliad* that soon, to the eyes of the child, they grow familiar as his mother's shawl; yet of this great gain he is unconscious, and on he goes, vengefully thirsting for the best blood of Troy, and never remitting his fierceness till almost suddenly it is changed for sorrow—the new and generous sorrow that he learns to feel when the noblest of all his foes lies sadly dying at the Scaean gate.

Heroic days are these, but the dark ages of schoolboy life come closing over them. I suppose it's all right in the end, yet at first sight it does seem a sad intellectual fall from your mother's dressing-room to a buzzing school. You feel so keenly the delights of early knowledge! You form strange, mystic friendships with the mere names of mountains and seas and continents and mighty rivers; you learn the ways of the planets, and transcend their narrow limits, and ask for the end of space; you vex the electric cylinder till it yields you, for your toy to play with, that subtle fire in which our earth was forged; you know of the nations that have towered high in the world, and the lives of the men who have saved whole empires from oblivion. What more will you ever learn? Yet the dismal change is ordained, and then, thin meager Latin (the same for everybody), with small shreds and patches of Greek, is thrown like a pauper's pall over all your early lore; instead of sweet knowledge, vile monkish, doggerel grammars and graduses, dictionaries and lexicons, and horrible odds and ends of dead languages are given you for your story to a three-inch scrap of *Scriptores Romani*, from Greek poetry, down, down to the cold rations of *Poetae Graeci*, cut up by commentators and served out by schoolmasters!